

Testimony of Vickie I. Ford  
To the  
United States House of Representatives

**Committee on Agriculture**

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Greeley, CO

Good morning, members of the House Agricultural Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify as a producer regarding the upcoming 2007 farm bill. My name is Vickie Ford, and I am a potato farmer from Center, Colorado. I represent myself as a producer and do not represent any trade organization. I am also an appointed member of the Colorado Agricultural Commission, which serves in an advisory capacity to the Colorado Commissioner of Agriculture.

I speak as a Certified Seed Potato producer, fresh market organic and conventional potato producer, malt barley producer, specialty hay producer, and seed canola producer. Our farm has tried to diversify, as prices and weather affecting all these crops are volatile. Our farm has not traditionally participated in many federal crop programs. We have received some loan deficiency payments, and most recently have tried to participate in the EQUIP program. We do buy Federal Crop insurance for some of our crops, and it is this aspect of the 2007 farm bill that I wish to address first.

Federal Crop Insurance needs to be enhanced and changed. In some cases it is not meeting the needs of producers who need it the most. For example, it does not cover alfalfa hay. In Colorado's San Luis Valley production area this year, 75% of 135,000 acres of alfalfa winter-killed. It costs \$8,000 to \$10,000 to re-seed 135 acres of alfalfa, and the farmers have no crop insurance to help them. Canola is not covered unless the producer has a 4 year growing history, and seed potatoes are not covered either. Specialty crops need risk management, and Federal Crop insurance needs to cover more of them. Farmers need to diversify, but when they do, their risks are not covered. Also, the language used in the insurance policies make it impossible for both a producer and his insurance agent to understand them. Farmers often don't know what coverage they are signing up for because the agent doesn't understand the policy either.

I support the long-standing provision that places restrictions on planting. As long as some farmers receive direct payments from the government, they should not be allowed to plant crops on that subsidized land that compete with unsubsidized farmers. Due to the nature of high-value specialty crop production, such as organic fruits and vegetables, many current Farm Bill programs and disaster programs are of little use to specialty producers due to payment caps, limits on Adjusted Gross Income, and limits on off-farm income. I would encourage a thorough review of all farm programs to ensure that specialty crop producers have access to benefits comparable to other farmers, rather than being excluded or limited, simply due to higher cost of production. Also, American fruits and vegetables need promotion and access to new markets, and our phytosanitary enforcement needs to be increased.

Americans are increasingly becoming overweight, adding to the skyrocketing cost of health care in this country. I would support a strong new focus within the 2007 Farm Bill which would expand the school fruit and vegetable snack program, and would support development of a new nutrition promotion program. This program would help Americans increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables to meet the 2005 Dietary Guidelines. Meeting federal health guidelines would require Americans on average to double their consumption of fruits and vegetables, an increase in demand that would create significant value to U.S. growers and would be a cost-effective way for the federal government to invest in the sustainability of U.S. fruit and vegetable growers while tackling the critical obesity and health crisis that is draining federal funds for escalating health care costs.

I am in favor of “block granting” conservation dollars and disaster dollars to the individual states. Many times, the rules and regulations farms must follow in order to have access to these dollars do not fit the agricultural area and conditions under which they must work. It would be better to have these dollars under local control, where local conservationists and state departments of agriculture and the NRCS know the best practices to follow. There should be fewer hoops to jump through, and in my opinion, the “one size fits all” model just doesn’t work. Disasters tend to move around according to the weather and many times there are disasters within a small area of an individual state. It would be better to administer disaster dollars locally.

The current \$80,000 payment limit on disaster payments is not fair to fruit and vegetable producers. Due to higher input and labor costs, loss per acre experienced by specialty crop producers as a result of a disaster is significantly greater than for program crops. The cost of production data maintained by the FSA should be used to index disaster program benefits.

Many farmers and ranchers do not participate fully in conservation programs such as EQUIP, Conservation Security Program, and Farm and Ranchland Protection Program because they are not “user friendly” and some of the rules do not fit local conditions. Most farmers and ranchers are VERY interested in conservation—the programs available are just not flexible enough to make them workable. If these programs are going to be continued and hopefully made effective, it would be better to “block grant” these dollars to the states.

There needs to be more cooperation between federal agencies as well. Farms and ranches serve as important habitat for many species. USDA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service need to work together on habitat acquisition, which can be accomplished through conservation easements. The rules need to be changed to allow land acquisition for endangered species to include cost-sharing, including monies for conservation easements, with USDA.

Finally, I believe that the USDA needs to help producers deal with increasing fuel and energy costs which have a tremendous impact on getting produce to market. This, coupled with road weight limitations and restrictions on driver hours could cripple the produce industry. The Transportation Services Branch of USDA-AMS should be expanded to include a grant program for state and local governments, grower cooperatives, individual growers and shippers, and state grower and shipper organizations to expand and improve transportation infrastructure and address regional transportation needs. We need to improve the cost effective movement of fresh fruits and vegetables to markets either within the U.S. or abroad.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. There are better ways to use the limited pool of federal funds to help protect the future viability of farming and ranching in the United States, and I hope I have touched upon a few of them.